

THE PYRAMID NEAR KOVIL AS A PHENOMENON OF THE CULTURAL HERITAGE ON THE BALKANS AND A RESOURCE FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF CULTURAL TOURISM

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The rock-hewn pyramid near the village of Kovil (Rhodopa Mountain), which was studied at the end of 2014 by a team of the University Research Centre for Ancient European and Easterly Mediterranean Cultures at South-West University “Neofit Rilski” (Bulgaria), poses a great interest (Fig.1). The village of Kovil is located in the Eastern Rhodopes, 5 km north of Krumovgrad, Kardzhali Region. To the east and north of the village, on a low rock plateau, there is a vast sacred territory which consists of whole complexes of stone-hewn altars, chutes, cult caves, trapezium-shaped niches, traces of ancient constructions, silhouettes of stone figures...The plateau is marked with water wells cut in the cliffs, which were probably used as sacred water sources. With its vast area of approximately five or six kilometers in length and two kilometers in width and with its concentration of megalithic and stone-hewn monuments, this sanctuary was one of the biggest in size sacred territories in Ancient Thrace.

The sacred centre of this gigantic holy territory is located in the western part of the plateau. A remarkable concentration of cult platforms full of stone-hewn altars, trapezium-shaped niches, cave temples located on several levels in the height of the sheer cliff can be found here. The most impressive among them is the stone-hewn terraced pyramid, which is cut in the main cliff of the plateau.

The pyramid has five levels. Its length at the bottom is about fifteen meters and it has the same total height. It is oriented according to the main directions of the world. It is adjoining the sheer cliff in which it was cut, thus its northern side adheres to the massif of the rock plateau. The first, second and third rock terraces, as well as the flat top of the pyramid are wide enough so they were used for ancient cult practices. Evidence for this are the registered on them stone-hewn altars with chutes flowing south, east and west. Their solar orientation implies that those are traces of cult practices connected with pouring out sacred liquid and which were dedicated to the sun deity. The traces of the sun cult can be vividly seen in the biggest cut out into the rock, which is found on the first, the lowest, terrace of the rock pyramid. It is a sizeable semi-arch rock niche, which is oriented east-west and is wide open to south. The total length is more than twelve meters and its width is three meters. In this way a small stone-hewn temple is formed (Fig. 2). In the thin stone wall to the east there is an

opening in the form of an eye through which the rays of the rising sun entered and fell on the north wall of the niche. It is very likely that it was a temple of the sun hewn into the rock and one of its functions in ancient times was to determine the calendar time.

A special attention should be paid to the few large and deep stone-hewn niches/ tombs at the foot of the terraced pyramid. They are also open to the south. The rock caves that are situated at the foot of the pyramid and the temple of the sun, which is hewn into the rock above them, are connected with the rest of the cult terraces along the height of the pyramid by a narrow pathway cut into the rock.

Dating the pyramid near Kovil is of utmost significance. The fragmented ceramics found on the second and third terraces has slid down from the cultural layer which is located on top of the plateau. The earliest fragments can be dated from the Halcolite age. It is likely that one very small fragment of a ceramic cult figure, which was found on the second terrace of the pyramid, belongs to those materials. The rest of the ceramic material can be generally dated from pre-Roman and Thracian-Roman times in Thrace. In this way a wide range of possible dating of the terraced pyramid appears, which expands over several millennia, most probably from the end of 4th century BC to the middle of 1st century AD.

Even at first sight the terraced pyramid near the village of Kovil resembles the terraced pyramid of Djoser in Egypt. The studied stone-hewn pyramid in Thrace, like the pyramids in Egypt, was definitely connected with the cult of sun and the “rock tombs” at its foot remind us of the burial functions of this type of monuments in Ancient Egyptian civilization. The silhouette of a lion, which can be seen right next to the pyramid to the west, also directs our attention to the connection between the pyramids in Giza and the Egyptian Sphinx¹ because of the parallel between them. Thus an interesting fact is Herodotus’ account of the march of the mythological Egyptian Pharaoh Sesostris² most likely in that part of Thrace. A small but important detail, the stone-hewn path joining the three parts of the terraced pyramid near Kovil, leads me to the conclusion that the monument was used for certain cult-ritual practices. That is why the pyramid near the village of Kovil bears a remarkable resemblance to the architectonics and functions of the ziggurats in Mesopotamia, where ceremonial staircases join the foot of the pyramid with its sides and its top on which the temple is located. Another parallel with Mesopotamia is the forming of the “temple of the sun” on the first or the lowest terrace of the pyramid. According to the Sumerian-Akkadian mythology each step of the

¹ Х.У. Джаксън. Ал. Джаксън. История на изкуството. С. 2008., т.1, с. 42-75. Р. Дейвид. Древен Египет. Религия, митология, история. София: Колибри, 2004, с.115-119.

² Herod. II, 102-103

ziggurat corresponds to one of the several stone skies where the first and the lowest is the visible one. It is the one where the sun, moon and stars are placed³. In my opinion another important detail directs us to the most likely genealogy of the monument – it was not built like its Egyptian, Mesopotamian, Middle Asian or Asian Minor counterparts⁴ but it was cut into the rock, which was a sign of closely following the local tradition and it was also part of a Proto-Thracian and Thracian megalithic sanctuary. The pyramid shape, although it is not clearly manifested, can be found in Thracian and Phrygian stone-hewn sanctuaries⁵. In this respect the monument should be interpreted in its semantic and especially its functional purpose as part of the religion of the late Chalcolithic Age where the cult of the sun was best expressed⁶ and particularly in the Thracian Orphism⁷.

Some good opportunities for explaining the functions of this ancient cult structure are given by its structural and semantic analysis. Firstly, it should be pointed out that the pyramid is a symbol of the cosmic mountain⁸. At its foot is the underworld marked in the studied monument by stone-hewn underground temples/tombs, the sides of the pyramid, which represent the earthly world, marked on the first terrace with a “temple of the sun” and stone-hewn altars on all levels above. Those are cult structures where the people from the earthly world worship the deity. Finally, on the highest point there is the flat top of the pyramid – a symbol of the heavenly world, which is also marked by three stone-hewn altars. To the symbolism of the heavenly world we should add the numerous altars that were hewn into the rock and which are located on the rock terrace along the whole south-west part of the plateau, corresponding structurally to the top of the terraced pyramid. Thus we can see a vast sacred area probably dedicated to Heaven and symbolizing the common ritual table of gods and people⁹. Following this way of thinking a special attention should be paid to the perfectly circular altar which was cut into the western edge of the rock plateau. It has a chute “flowing” westward. Because of its parallels with the sun circles of the Thracian sanctuaries it can be successfully interpreted as both a symbol and an altar devoted to the Sun god (Fig. 3), which was identified with Dionysius-Sabazios in Ancient Thrace¹⁰.

³ В.К. Афанасиев. Шумеро-акадская мифология. В: Мифы народов мира. Москва, 1988, т. II, с. 647-653

⁴ Х.У. Джаксън. Ал. Джаксън. История на изкуството. С. 2008., т. I, с. 42-75.

⁵ М. Василева. Цар Мидас между Европа и Азия. София: БАН, 2005, с. 94; E. Haspels. The Highlands of Phrygia. Sites and Monuments. Princeton, 1971, vol. 2, pl. 28, 29

⁶ История на България. С. БАН, 1979, с. 87

⁷ Д. Попов. Тракология. София: ЛИК, 1999, с. 183-202

⁸ М. Елиаде. Трактат по история на религиите. София: ЛИК, 1995, с. 249-273

⁹ В.Г. Ардзинба. Ритуалы и мифы Древней Анатолии. Москва: Наука, 1988, с. 76-79.

¹⁰ Ал. Фол. Тракийският Дионис. Книга втора. Сабазий. София: УИ Климент Охридски, 1994.

The stone-hewn path, which is situated on the terraced pyramid, in symbolically-mythological aspect joins the three parts (spheres) of the universe – underworld, earthly world and heavenly world and presupposes cult-ritual practices with shamanistic character: going round the three spheres of the universe, going down in the underworld and climbing up to the heavenly world. Thus in semantic aspect the terraced pyramid near Kovil¹¹ is a ladder – a sacred road either for going down to the underworld or better for going up to the heavenly world. It is likely that up a similar ladder, a sacred road to the sky, the Thracian chieftain and priest called Cosingas was getting ready to climb up the sky. Along such a narrow path the Thracian king, priest and god Orpheus goes down and brings out of the underworld his beloved Eurydice. The cult-ritual practices of going down and out of the underworld, as well as climbing up to the heavenly world, are the base of the mythological beliefs in the ritual of becoming immortal in Ancient Thrace. Having in mind all this we could assume that the terraced pyramid near Kovil is a cult structure connected with the ubiquitous religious reverence for the Sun God, which was spread in the whole area of the Eastern Mediterranean and the ancient Near East, as well as with the cult of the Great Mother Goddess¹². Traces of the cult of the Great Mother Goddess can be found in the impressive with its size cave temple situated to the west next to the terraced pyramid. The monumental silhouette of a lioness above it (Fig.1), together with the phenomenal concentration of remarkable stone-hewn altars on the back of the figure as well as on the ritual terrace in front of the figure (Fig.4; Fig.5), leave no place for another interpretation.

The terraced pyramid near the village of Kovil is situated only 5 km north of Krumovgrad and with appropriate infrastructure it can become an outstanding site for the development of the cultural tourism in the region and in the country.

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¹¹ Д. Попов. Тракология. София: ЛИК, 1999, с. 183-202

¹² Фол, В. Скални топоси на вяра. В Югоизточна Европа и в мала Азия през древността. София: БАН, 2007; L.E. Roller. In Search of God the Mother. The Cult of Anatolian Cybelle. Berkeley, Los Angelisq London, 1999, p. 27-110



Fig. 1



Fig. 2



Fig. 3



Fig. 4



Fig. 5